

# NYC Customer Service Newsletter

Volume 5 Issue 4 - August 2013

## Department of Finance Partners with the Human Resources Administration to Accept Credit Cards for the First Time Ever

On June 24, 2013, the Human Resources Administration (HRA) took its very first credit card payment from a customer. The new payment offering, which provides an electronic payment option in a formerly paper-intensive environment, comes as a result of HRA's partnership with the Department of Finance's Citywide Payments and Receivables Services Division (CPRS). Established at the Department of Finance (DOF) in 2011, CPRS provides shared services to fellow City agencies in the payments arena, including but not limited to the implementation of electronic payment services, payments expertise, policy and procurement, and consultative services for agencies seeking new solutions for accepting payments from their customers.

HRA and DOF began working together in the first quarter of 2013 to implement in-person credit card payments in three HRA locations: the Division of Accounts Receivable and Billing, the Claims and Collections Unit, and the Bureau of Fraud Investigation. All of these units accept payments related to Medicaid coverage. HRA wished to provide additional payment methods for customers to supplement paper checks and money orders.

Working with agencies like HRA, CPRS is making it easier for NYC's customers to pay for City services, from dog licenses to parking cards to property taxes. CPRS aims to facilitate customers' ability to pay when, where, and how they wish to pay. DOF looks forward to continuing to partner with HRA and other City agencies to expand payment options. To view NYC services and bills available for payment online, visit [www.nyc.gov/CityPay](http://www.nyc.gov/CityPay).



**Staff from HRA's Division of Accounts Receivable and Billing**  
**Top from Left: Carolyn Holloman, Tawana McKune and Edward Bowen**  
**Bottom from Left: Lisa Grant, Roshnee Dhanraj, Debra Murphy and Jacqueline Shine**

## Department of Probation Greeters Making a Good First Impression in the South Bronx

When Commissioner Vincent Schiraldi joined the Department of Probation(DOP) in 2010, one of his first orders of business was improving the drab and unwelcoming waiting rooms. The agency quickly formed a Waiting Room Improvement Team to create a blueprint for public spaces that reflected a commitment to helping people on probation take control of their lives. With help from See ChangeNYC, an initiative of the NYC Department of Design and Construction, and generous support from Biber Architects and famed graphic designer James Victore, DOP has transformed many of its waiting rooms into vibrant Resource Hubs that have been featured in [Metropolis](#) and [NY1](#).

But improving the physical space is only part of the equation. DOP knew that it also needed to bring specially trained staff into the Resource Hubs to set the right tone for the rooms and help connect clients to the information and resources they need to get the most out of probation and break the cycle of crime. The South Bronx Neighborhood Opportunity Network (NeON) is home to two Greeters, Barbara McCain and Cheryl Brown, who are defining the role a Greeter can play in the probation office and reshaping the probation process for hundreds of clients.



**Barbara and Commissioner Schiraldi**

Barbara McCain had been working at DOP in an administrative role when she saw the job notice for Greeter posted on the agency's intranet. A sampling of the duties outlined in the notice gives a good sense of DOP's new priorities:

- "Welcome clients/visitors and provide them with friendly and helpful service as they enter DOP facilities."
- "Assist in gathering information for probation personnel from a variety of sources, including public and private social agencies, law enforcement agencies, courts, employers and others."
- "Assist in establishing or maintaining contact with persons or organizations in the community that may provide necessary resources for individuals serviced by the agency and accompany client to these resources."

Barbara knew this was the job for her and was thrilled to be selected for the position. She enjoys interacting one-on-one with the clients and is a calming and steady presence in the Resource Hub.



**Cheryl and poet-in-residence Dave Johnson**

Cheryl Brown's path to becoming a Greeter is unique. In fact, she's actually a volunteer, not a DOP employee. She first visited the South Bronx NeON alongside her son, who had been placed on probation. At the orientation, she learned that DOP was seeking parents to volunteer in the Resource Hub and bring their unique perspective to DOP. Cheryl immediately volunteered and has been brightening the Hub with her boundless enthusiasm and sunny demeanor ever since. Never one to sit on the sidelines, Cheryl regularly shares her poetry at readings organized by the NeON's [poet-in-residence](#), Dave Johnson. DOP is extremely grateful for Cheryl's help and hopes other parents will follow her lead.

### **City Opens "Build it Back Centers" to Help Hurricane Sandy Victims**

The City's efforts to help residents recover from Hurricane Sandy took a monumental leap forward in July when the Mayor's Office of Housing Recovery Operations opened five "Build it Back Centers" to serve residents in the communities hardest hit by the storm. The Centers, located in Brooklyn, Queens and Staten Island, will serve as the home base for NYC Build it Back, the City program funded by the Federal Community Development Block Grant Disaster Recovery (CDBG-DR) Bill passed by Congress.

More than 13,000 residents have registered for NYC Build it Back since Mayor Bloomberg announced the program on June 3. The goal of NYC Build it Back is to help affected residents return to safe, sustainable housing by addressing unmet housing recovery needs. It is designed to make the newly available Federal aid simple and understandable, with a focus on compassionate, friendly customer service. Customers are assigned to "Housing Recovery Specialists" to help them complete their application, review their options and guide them through each step of the process.



**Arverne Build it Back Center in Queens**

NYC Build it Back provides multiple pathways to help affected residents return to more sustainable housing: Repair, Rebuild, Reimbursement and Acquisition. For customers who need repairs, NYC Build it Back can assign contractors to complete the work, or the customers can choose their own contractor, within certain rules and limitations. For those who need their homes built, they may choose from several customizable model homes designed specifically for their communities. Or they may also choose their own contractor. If they have already spent out-of-pocket funds to make repairs, they may be eligible for reimbursement. They may also have the option of voluntarily selling their homes to the City. New York City has been working with its partners in New York State to determine where it makes sense to purchase properties return to undeveloped, open space (NY State Buyout Program), and where it makes sense to purchase properties which can be redeveloped to more resilient standards. Housing Recovery Specialists explains those options to customers.

The first step of the Build it Back process began July 8, when Housing Recovery Specialists scheduled one-on-one appointments with their customers at local Build it Back Centers. Customers were thrilled because perhaps for the first time since the storm struck New York City on October 29, 2012, they did not have to stand in long lines for government assistance, or wait, frustrated, to ask questions. Customers were given the time they needed, told their stories, and did not leave until their questions were answered and they understood the program and where they fit in.

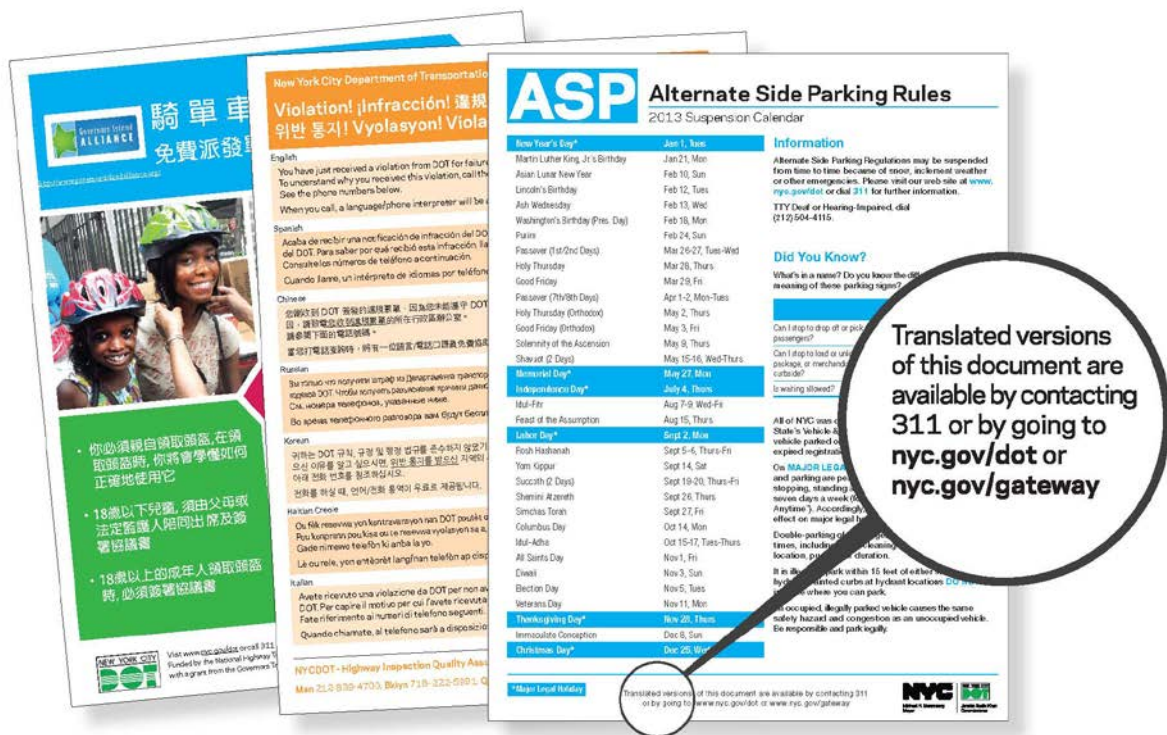
Over the coming weeks, some of these customers will move on to the next step, where professionals will assess the damage to their properties and determine the cost to complete repairs or rebuild. They will then have another meeting with the Housing Recovery Specialists to go over the assessments and their options and a create plan to “Build it Back.”



# LEP Customers, DOT has You Covered!

The Department of Transportation (DOT) has taken steps to ensure that Limited English Proficient (LEP) customers access documents in their preferred language and that they are aware of available language interpretation services. DOT’s LEP customer base is as diverse as the range of services DOT offers. Translated documents include calendars, guides, maps, notices, fact sheets, notice of free interpretation posters, and flyers. Topics are varied and cover services such as bicycle helmet fittings, commercial bicyclist regulations, and issues related to parking, ferries, truck routes, pedestrian safety, school safety, permits, pedestrian plazas, and more.

1. DOT has included “tag lines” on documents alerting customers that they can also access translated versions of those documents via 311, on the DOT website or on the Language Gateway.
2. DOT launched a Language Access Survey to assess LEP customers’ preferred language in speaking and writing and their overall satisfaction with DOT’s interpretation and translation services.
3. DOT designed a flyer that includes a short paragraph in English and in the Top Six LEP languages informing LEPs who may receive a violation how to access more information about the violation through a language interpreter.



And to reinforce the importance of DOT’s Language Access Program, all DOT employees received a memo and Language Access Fact Sheet from Commissioner Sadik-Khan on July 3 that acknowledges and supports the efforts of Customer Service in providing the full range of services to LEPs.

## CORE and LASS Inspections Promote the Best Experience for NYC Customers

The Mayor's Office of Operations oversees two programs geared towards improving the customer experience - Customers Observing and Reporting Experience (CORE) and Language Access Secret Shopper (LASS).

### **Customers Observing and Reporting Experience - CORE**

Once a year, CORE inspectors check on the physical condition, customer wait time and the interactions between customers and staff, both security and front-line staff, at approximately 300 City walk-in service centers. The goal of CORE is to provide clean and well-maintained service centers that are staffed by courteous and professional staff.

2013 is the sixth year of the CORE program and the fourth year that provides comparable year-to-year data. Using strict criteria, inspectors observe and rate the condition of walls, floors, ceilings, bathrooms, windows, etc., as well as the availability of seating, the length of wait time and the interactions between customers and staff. Observations are recorded electronically and sent to a central database where the results are tallied and analyzed. Where necessary, inspectors take photos of physical conditions to document their ratings.



**CORE photo of service center documenting loose wall covering**

The results continue to be encouraging as this year 55 service centers received perfect scores of 100, compared to 38 sites in 2012; there were only seven sites with perfect scores in 2010. Service centers with perfect scores receive a certificate from Mayor Bloomberg acknowledging the accomplishment of service center staff and management. In contrast to last year, when 16 sites required re-inspections because of poor physical conditions, only six sites required re-inspection in 2013. Sites requiring re-inspections are re-inspected by CORE inspectors to ensure that conditions identified have been corrected. The photos below show graffiti found in a bathroom by a CORE inspector and the resulting clean up.



Service center bathroom door before CORE inspection



Service center bathroom door painted after CORE inspection

### **Language Access Secret Shopper Program - LASS**

New York is one of the world's most diverse cities and is home to over 300 different languages. To provide New Yorkers who are not proficient in English access to City services, in 2008 Mayor Bloomberg issued Executive Order 120, which requires agencies to provide notices of free interpretation, translation services, and translated documents and signage. The LASS program was created to improve the customer experience by ensuring that agencies comply with the City's language access policy.

Each summer the Office of Operations recruits bilingual interns who "secret shop" about 200 City walk-in service centers. The secret shoppers pretend not to know English or that they are trying to help a non-English speaking friend or relative. During their shops the interns evaluate their interactions with security and frontline staff, the length of time it takes to have service provided in a non-English language, and the availability and language diversity of required signage and documents. At the conclusion of their shops, the interns' findings are collected in a database and, when all shops are completed, the findings are tabulated, analyzed and shared with the shopped agencies.

The LASS interns conducted their secret shops in Spanish, Urdu and Chinese. LASS was assisted with 13 of the 216 shops by staff from the Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs whose shoppers used Spanish, Russian and Dutch.



From left to right, LASS Secret Shoppers Sophie Qian (Columbia

**University School of Engineering), Natasha Gabbay (University of Pennsylvania), Atef Rafiuddin (SUNY-Stony Brook), and Anqi Wei (Wesleyan University).**

2013 LASS findings were largely positive: In 2013, 84% of interactions with frontline staff were either excellent or good. From 2011-2013, the percentage of sites with an excellent rating for notice of free interpretation signs increased from 78% to 92%. During the same period, the percentage of sites that provided translation services to secret shoppers increased from 55% to 85%. From 2012-2013, the percentage of sites with an excellent rating in translated signage increased from 17% to 46%. Agencies need to focus on providing more translated signage and documents, as well as improving security guards' interactions with LEP customers.

In addition to visiting walk-in service centers in person, LASS secret shoppers also called City hotlines to receive service in languages other than English. Interns called 17 hotlines at 11 agencies and noted whether services in languages other than English were available, the nature of those services (Language Line, bi-lingual employee or translated recording), and the quality of the translation/interpretation. Secret shoppers were able to receive translation during 24 of the 32 calls they made, an improvement from the 17 times when they received translated services in 2012.

The Office of Operations meets with all shopped agencies, identifies areas needing improvement and works with agencies to maintain future compliance with language access policies.

## **MillionTreesNYC Announces Launch of Redesigned Website**

MillionTreesNYC has recently launched a new website designed by Infinia Group, a brand strategy firm.

The website for MillionTreesNYC has been redesigned to create a better public user experience. The site is now easier to navigate, allowing for better access to the MillionTreesNYC event calendars and to programs that are open to the public. New Yorkers can now request and register a tree online, as well as apply for TreeLC mini-grants of up to \$1000 for street tree and reforestation projects.

The interactive map of all the planted trees in New York City makes adopting street trees a much smoother process. The website's new "Care" section offers updated resources, tips, and photos. All the information that a New Yorker would need to care for a tree, whether a street tree or a park tree, has been put online in a helpful and concise package. The new "Care" section also provides a place for New Yorkers to sign up for different tree care workshops and for volunteer sessions. To focus on all the great work that the public has done, a new photo album was added to the website, celebrating the many New Yorkers who have joined the tree care movement. The site also provides the "Educator Toolkit," an easy guide of education programs and resources for New York City teachers who would like to involve their students with this great project.



MillionTreesNYC is a citywide public-private partnership between the Parks Department and Bette Midler’s New York Restoration Project, through which one million trees will be planted and cared for throughout the five boroughs by 2017. The City will plant 60% of trees along streets, in parks, and in other public spaces. The other 40% will come from homeowners, the business community, and non-profit organizations.

The Parks Department has been and will continue to be indispensable in accomplishing the goal of the City planting 60% of the million trees. The Parks Department will achieve this by planting an estimated 220,000 curbside trees and by reforesting 2,000 acres of parkland into new, ecologically healthy forests. These new trees and forests will help to expand the canopy cover in New York City, increasing the many environmental benefits already provided by the City’s urban forest, such as improving air quality, providing wildlife habitat, and increasing property value. Since MillionTreesNYC was launched in October 2007, the initiative has surpassed its halfway mark with 757,366 trees planted to date.

To check out the redesigned website, visit <http://www.milliontreesnyc.org/html/home/home.shtml>.

**Mayor’s Office of Operations (OPS)**

Elizabeth Weinstein, Director

**Editor**

Francisco Navarro, OPS

**Contributors**

- Eleanor Di Palma, DOT
- Ryan Dodge, DOP
- Eric Munson, DOF
- Francisco Navarro, OPS
- Amelia Root, DPR
- Peter Spencer, HRO

If you would like to subscribe to this newsletter, please send an email to [customerservice@cityhall.nyc.gov](mailto:customerservice@cityhall.nyc.gov). Enter “Subscribe” in the subject field.